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ABSTRACT

Multiage education is the placement of children of varying ages, grades, and ability levels in the same classroom with the aim of improving learning for all of them. Teaching a multiage class requires very different knowledge and skills than teaching traditional single-grade classes. Interest in multiage education has grown in recent years, and more educators are asking for information on how and why it works, and for practical advice on implementation. Five recent publications that address these questions are reviewed in this brief: (1) "A Common-Sense Guide to Multiage Practices" (Jim Grant and Bob Johnson); (2) "Full Circle: A New Look at Multiage Education" (Pennelle Chase and Jane Doan); (3) "Multiage Portraits: Teaching and Learning in Mixed-Age Classrooms" (Charles Rathbone, Anne Bingham, Molly McClaskey, and Justine O'Keefe); (4) "Children at the Center: Implementing the Multiage Classroom" (Bruce A. Miller); and (5) "Nongraded Education: Overcoming Obstacles to Implementing the Multiage Classroom" (Joan Gaustad). (LMI)

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Implementing Multiage Education

Joan Gaustad

Multiage education is the placement of children of varying ages, grades, and ability levels in the same classroom with the aim of improving learning for all of them. In multiage classes, which are most common at the primary level, students often remain with the same teacher or team for more than one year. Such classes have been given many different names, including *blends*, *vertical* or *family grouping*, *nongraded* or *ungraded*, *multigrade*, and *multiage continuous progress*. In nongraded programs, grade designations are eliminated; in other programs grade distinctions may remain, but are de-emphasized.

Whatever label is used, multiage classroom organization can facilitate the use of developmentally appropriate practices, yielding significant cognitive, social, and emotional benefits for students. Cooperative behavior, respect for individual differences, and a family-like sense of community are more easily achieved in multiage than in single-age classes. But teaching a multiage class requires very different knowledge and skills than teaching traditional single-grade classes, and teachers need training, time, and support to master them.

Interest in multiage education has soared in recent years, and there is a growing demand by educators for information on how and why it works, and for practical advice on implementation. Five recent publications that respond to this need are reviewed here.

Jim Grant and *Bob Johnson* of the Society for Developmental Education explain the theoretical and philosophical foundations for developmentally appropriate practices, discuss various types of classroom organization, and give specific examples and practical suggestions for moving into multiage education.

New Hampshire teachers *Pennelle Chase* and *Jane Doan* share their personal experiences as co-teachers of a multiage class. They also present perspectives on multiage education from other teachers, parents, and researchers.

University of Vermont professor *Charles Rathbone* presents the results of a three-part, qualitative research study. He explores the functioning of a long-established multiage classroom by means of extensive observation, augmented by interviews and discussion with teachers and students. Four teachers also offer reflections on their multiage teaching experiences.

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory researcher *Bruce A. Miller* focuses on the challenges of implementation. Miller used surveys and in-depth interviews to study four elementary schools that successfully implemented multiage programs. He gathered additional information by surveying more than 200 teachers currently using (or planning to use) multiage instructional practices.

Joan Gaustad also explores implementation problems and suggests ways to overcome them. She provides a review of the literature as well as interviews with multiage teachers and administrators from Oregon, Kentucky, and British Columbia.

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Grant, Jim, and Johnson, Bob. **A Common-Sense Guide to Multiage Practices.** Columbus, OH: Teacher's Publishing Group, 1994. 124 pages. ED 373 915. Available from: Crystal Springs Books, P.O. Box 500, Peterborough NH 03458. $16.95.

Grant and Johnson introduce multiage practices by "visiting" a model multiage classroom. They describe learning activities engaged in by individual students and small groups during a typical morning work session, explain the cognitive, social, affective, and physical components of each activity, and show how this free-choice period fits into the overall daily schedule.

Next, the authors summarize the research that supports developmentally appropriate practices and the effectiveness of multiage classes. They compare the characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages of five classroom configurations: *traditional single grade; combined grades*, in which groups of children of different ages are taught separate graded curricula; *looping*, in which a teacher remains with a single-age class for two years; *multigrade*, in which ages are mixed but some instruction is still grade-oriented; and *multiage continuous progress*, a configuration which is fully ungraded.

Grant and Johnson encourage educators to articulate their personal beliefs about learning and their goals for change before plunging into action, and they provide statements of such beliefs and goals from several multiage programs and publications to stimulate thought and discussion.

When implementing multiage education, say the authors, "Think big and start small." Adopting multiage strategies in small, manageable stages will increase the likelihood of success in the long run. It is important to anticipate the difficulty of the change process and allow plenty of time to experiment, rethink, and revise new practices.

This guide offers many specific, practical tips and suggestions for planning and implementing multiage practices, including a sample classroom floor plan, checklists, and charts. Other topics addressed include team teaching, communicating with parents, maintaining classroom order, integrating curriculum, supporting helpfulness and cooperation among students, and authentic assessment.

Chase, Pennelle, and Doan, Jane. **Full Circle: A New Look at Multiage Education.** Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994. 184 pages. ED 371 864. Available from: Heinemann, 361 Hanover Street, Portsmouth NH 03801-3912. $16.95.

Writing in a conversational style, Chase and Doan explain how they became multiage teachers, explain their educational beliefs, and give their views on co-teaching, theme studies, student choice, and parent involvement. They describe a typical day in their nongraded class of five- to eight-year-olds, the use and importance of dramatic play, and how an ongoing class project of growing and selling pumpkins integrates different subject areas (while also raising money). Assessment and classroom management are addressed in a chapter which focuses on the process of developing a classroom community with shared values about behavior, mutual caring and consideration, self-evaluation, and pride in creating quality work.

Part 1 of *Full Circle* embeds information about multiage organizational and instructional strategies in a narrative rich with examples of classroom life. The extent to which the authors use themselves as models for their students—in listening, asking questions, praising positive behavior and achievements, and treating others with respect—is particularly notable.

Part 2 features writings by other educators involved in multiage programs, from Maine to Nevada. They describe the challenges and rewards they encountered in developing programs to meet the needs of very different communities, including a Massachusetts preschool that has used mixed-age grouping for 25 years, a more recent K-2 program in rural Maine that mainstreams special-education students, a 5-6 class in Washington, D.C., and a multiage school in a New England facility for emotionally disturbed children.

Part 3 concludes with a review of the research literature on multiage grouping.

Rathbone, Charles; Bingham, Anne; Dorta, Peggy; McClaskey, Molly; and O'Keefe, Justine. **Multiage Portraits: Teaching and Learning in Mixed-Age Classrooms.** Peterborough, NH: Crystal Springs Books, 1993. 185 pages. ED 367 465. Available from: Crystal Springs Books, Route 202, Box 577, Peterborough NH 03458. $24.95 plus $3.50 shipping.

Rathbone spent 40 days as a participant observer in a K-3 primary classroom, one of four that compose a multiage unit in a Vermont school. Part 1 of *Multiage Portraits* presents his conclusions from those observations, his conversations with teacher Anne Bingham, and interviews with her students and the other members of her multiage teaching team.

Rathbone describes a typical day in the classroom, then reviews the history of the program, which began in 1972. He identifies and discusses seven elements he considers keys to successful multiage education: continuity, family, grouping, informality, interaction, routines, and "overlappingness." Rathbone also explores how students perceive multiage learning, and emphasizes the importance of time flexibility.

In Part 2, several teachers whom Rathbone considers to be excellent multiage practitioners write about significant events that helped clarify

their beliefs about multiage teaching. Bingham, Dorta, McClaskey, and O'Keefe agree on 11 characteristics of successful multiage teaching and describe their classroom practices.

Part 3 contains Rathbone's reflections and conclusions concerning his studies of multiage education. He discusses the relationship of Vygotsky's learning theories to multiage practices and the possible effects of his own biases on his research. He concludes with answers to common questions about multiage teaching and learning.

Miller, Bruce A. **Children at the Center: Implementing the Multiage Classroom.** Portland and Eugene, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory/ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1994. 123 pages. ED 376 544. Available from: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 5207 University of Oregon, Eugene OR 97403-5207. $15.95. (800) 438-8841.

Miller surveyed teachers, principals, parents and instructional assistants at four schools, as well as 202 educators attending a national multiage education conference. The surveys contained open-ended questions in four areas: reasons for implementing multiage programs, factors perceived to contribute to success, problems and challenges encountered, and advice for others considering multiage programs.

The survey results suggest that changes should be motivated by the desire to meet students' needs, and that planners should build support among key stakeholders, create a school climate that supports risk-taking, and allow realistic amounts of time for implementation.

Miller also conducted lengthy interviews with educators and parents at the four multiage schools: Lincoln Elementary School in Corvallis, Oregon; Overland Elementary School in Burley, Idaho; Boise-Eliot Elementary School in Portland, Oregon; and Concrete Elementary School in Concrete, Washington. He uses vivid quotes from the participants in tracing the twists and turns along each school's path to change.

Miller next discusses the findings from both his surveys and interviews, and their implications for educators interested in multiage practices. His prerequisites for success include "facilitative and transformational" leadership by principals, commitment and dedication by teachers, and support from a variety of sources.

He lists six key principles to help guide multiage planners:

1. Multiage instruction clearly yields benefits for both students and teachers that justify implementation.
2. Each program must be designed with regard to the school's unique needs and characteristics.
3. Successful implementation requires strong teacher involvement as well as administrative and district support.
4. Teachers need ongoing support to make major conceptual changes required by multiage teaching.
5. Implementing a multiage program is a long-term, evolutionary process that is facilitated by a "collaborative, problem-solving orientation to change."
6. It's best to devote at least a year to preliminary steps such as creating dialogue among staff members and community, evaluating school strengths and weaknesses, and planning immediate and long-term goals.

Gaustad, Joan. **Nongraded Education: Overcoming Obstacles to Implementing the Multiage Classroom.** Oregon School Study Council Bulletin, Special Issue (November and December 1994). Eugene, OR: Oregon School Study Council. 84 pages. ED 379 744. Available from: Publications Sales, OSSC, 5207 University of Oregon, Eugene OR 97403-5207. (800) 438-8841.

Gaustad first defines the terminology associated with multiage concepts and practices, noting points of potential confusion where terms have alternative definitions, program configurations vary, or experts disagree. She reviews the research on program effectiveness and notes that many questions do not yet have definitive answers because the knowledge base for multiage education is still expanding.

Gaustad says that communication problems often sabotage nongraded practices, notes the reasons why misunderstandings arise, and suggests actions that can reduce these occurrences. She warns administrators not to expect everyone to quickly and easily understand information about an innovation as complex as multiage education. Like their students, teachers need support and time to learn new skills and assimilate new concepts.

For example, the strategies that teachers of multiage classrooms use to maintain order differ greatly from traditional classroom-management practices. Teachers can develop these skills by receiving instruction from experienced practitioners and by visiting multiage classrooms. Professional development is much more effective when provided on an ongoing basis, allowing teachers to

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try the practices between training sessions, than when scheduled in a single block at the start of implementation.

Multiage teachers need psychological support from colleagues and administrators, says Gaustad, and while the principal plays a key role in creating a supportive school culture, support from the district and beyond is also very important.

Gaustad notes that planners often drastically underestimate the time and financial resources required to successfully implement multiage practices, and she examines how these factors have affected the implementation of multiage programs in British Columbia, Kentucky, and Oregon. ❑

The Principal's Role

The active support of the principal is indispensable to a successful nongraded program. And active is the key word. The prospects for success are poor if the principal arranges a workshop or two, exhorts teachers to change, and then retreats to the office. Creating a school culture that is supportive of teacher learning requires a substantial, ongoing, knowledgeable, skillful, well-directed investment of time and energy on the principal's part.

In many ways, the principal's role in the nongraded school parallels the teacher's role in the nongraded classroom. Here are several ways principals can support the faculty:

- Provide teachers with appropriate learning experiences to acquire knowledge and skills by arranging professional development opportunities.
- Ensure that all teachers feel supported, wherever they are on the developmental spectrum of change, while still pushing for continual professional growth.
- Facilitate positive, cooperative interactions among team members and among the entire teaching staff.
- Monitor the progress of implementation.
- Give teachers praise, feedback, and suggestions on an ongoing basis.
- Be available for help when problems arise.

(*from* Nongraded Education: Overcoming Obstacles to Implementing the Multiage Classroom, *by Joan Gaustad*)

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